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**Learning in retirement:**

**Developing resilience and becoming a resourceful practitioner of life**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to highlight the significance of symbolic resources for people in later life in retirement as a transition process. They learn to build resilience by seeking meaning and purpose in life and become resourceful practitioners of life as they experience the transitions of change and ruptures necessitated by retirement. The study draws on a theoretical framework consisting of sociocultural theory and related perspectives. This framework enables me to capture the dynamic ways in which people in later life learn to take control and overcome adversities and life challenges, in which they seek a new meaning of life, identify the life purpose, master new skills and creatively use social support. As an illustrative example I present a single-case interview-based study of a person in retirement. A thematic analysis of the interviews shows how she uses symbolic resources and draws on relational agency to meet her current needs, pursue new-found passions and achieve life goals. Lastly, I address theoretical implications for furthering the project on learning in later life.

**Keywords:** Resilience, symbolic resources, relational agency, learning in later life, transition, retirement

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## 1. Introduction

What is the meaning of life in the later stages of life? How do people in later life think about the meaning of life? Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor, advocates the importance of searching for the meaning of life at every stage during life (Frankl, 1963). He asserts:

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but *the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him*. (Viktor Emil Frankl, 1905 –1997, 1963, p. 166) (Emphasis by the author)

The quote highlights the central importance of human potentiality, or the possibility of becoming and being otherwise, in the pursuit for a purpose in life and trying to ascertain the meaning of life, even in the senseless suffering in Auschwitz, or in any given adverse situation. How do people in later life find a new purpose as they get older against all the odds? They face trauma, adversity and other stresses, albeit to a varying degree, having to adapt to life-changing situations and emerging even stronger than before. What is vital to successful ageing is building resilience and become skilled at resources including social support (APA). According to APA, resilience is defined as:

‘the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. As much as resilience involves “bouncing back” from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth.’ (APA, 2020)

The recent research on ageing and resilience underline that resilience is a relational construct rather than a personality characteristic (Stauginger & Greve, 2017; APA, 2020). In building their resilience, people in later life use their own resources strategies, some of which are suggested by mental health professionals. The overall aim of this paper is focused on people in later life building resilience highlighting the significance of symbolic resources and social support for people in later life transition as they learn to build resilience in seeking meaning

and purpose in life and become resourceful practitioners of life as they experience the transitions of change and ruptures necessitated by retirement.

In so doing, I will illustrate how a person in later life builds resilience and becomes resourceful by drawing on an eclectic theoretical framework consisting of sociocultural theory (Zittoun & Baucal, Säljö, in this issue) and related perspectives such as GeroPsychology (Valsiner, 2017), Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (hereafter CHAT) (Cole, 1996; Edwards, 2011) and Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2001). This framework enables me to capture the dynamic ways in which people in later life take control and overcome adversities and life challenges, in which they seek a new meaning of life, identify the life purpose, master new skills and creatively use social support. They draw on various symbolic resources to learn how to build resilience and become resourceful practitioners of life. With an interview-based exploratory single-case study, aligned with the project of learning and ageing (in this issue), I will explore learning in later life through a person's meaning construction with the use of symbolic resources.

Firstly, I outline the relevant studies on retirement and ageing as well as that of learning in later life. This review is underpinned by a sociocultural theoretical perspective on learning to build resilience and becoming a resourceful practitioner of life. Then, as an illustrative example of this theoretical perspective, I address my methodological orientations to a single case study and present a thematic analysis of the interviews. Lastly, I offer conclusive remarks on learning in later life, and highlight the importance of people in later life building resilience and resourcefulness through the use of symbolic resources.

## 1 Retirement, Ageing and Learning in later life

In raising the question of how people learn to build resilience and become resourceful practitioners of later life, I anchor my inquiry on retirement,<sup>1</sup> as it is an important life course transition and marks the onset of old age (Ryser & Wernli, 2017). From a life course perspective (Elder, 1995; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003), life transitions involve major changes in a persons' social role and status and calls for the reorganisation of everyday routines and social interactions. However, such transitions also imply new challenges and opportunities. Following a developmental sociocultural psychology perspective, transitions imply identity changes, skills acquisition, and meaning construction (Zittoun, 2006, p. xiv). In line with Zittoun's (2006) proposed unit of analysis, I consider transition as a psychological developmental process and examine "the unit *rupture-irruption of uncertainty-transition, implying processes leading to a new form of stability*" (Zittoun, 2006, p. 5). A new form of stability can be seen as an outcome of a person's managing to build resilience in overcoming adversities and life challenges and becoming a resourceful practitioner of life. For the sociocultural theory perspective, the new form of stability is not final, not once-and-for-all, nor permanently stable; it can be subjected to further ruptures, thus opened up for possibilities of further change as life goes on.

Osborne (2012) reports a catalogue of psychological effects of retiring including identity disruption, decision paralysis, diminished self-trust, experiencing a post-retirement void, coping with the simultaneous impact of ageing and retirement, and death anxiety, all whilst trying to develop a retirement life structure and searching for meaningful engagement in society. Clearly, retirement provides an opportunity for life review, self-reflection and

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I acknowledge the term 'retirement' has a variety of definitions in the literature (Hershenson, 2016). I define retirement as an institutional perspective of retirement, that is a social status that may first be achieved by becoming a recipient of a public or private old-age pension independent of one's current occupational status" (Ryser & Wernli, 2017, p. 43).

acting on engaging new activities such as learning. Seeing retirement as an institutional definition (see Footnote 1) enables us to look at retirement as a transition process with the use of symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2008) including social support. Here, to be clear about my approach to retirement as a transition process, I defer from making any normative judgement about retirement, addressing whether people have a positive view on it or not, or reporting the participant's view on retirement as negative (or positive). The focus is how retirement as a transition process unfolds further developmental possibilities such as taking up a new identity, learning new skills and constructing new meanings with relationships to others.

What kind of learning then takes places for those people in later life, facing retirement and experiencing transitional effects of the retirement? Arguably, diversity of all kinds among the adult population increases with age and therefore it is problematic to generalise about 'older people' and to ask questions as to what, how and why older people learn. We need to understand not only how older learners differ from 'non-learners', but the ways in which older learners differ among themselves, and therefore the variety of ways in which individuals may benefit from formal and non-formal learning (Jamieson, 2016). Jamieson (2016) asks what education means to people in later life (aged 60 or above), particularly in retirement. The focus is on formal learning involving structured classroom activities with clear learning objectives; sometimes, though not necessarily, resulting in a recognised qualification. Based on her last 10-year research projects conducted at a London university, she reports the characteristics, motivations and benefits of formal learning of people in later life, building up a picture of the meanings of formal learning for different individuals and at different points of the life course, including retirement. A classification of the different types of roles education played in individual lives was proposed (Jamieson, Miller, & Stafford, 1988) and education was construed as: (1) Part of a search for meaning and self-development; (2) Part of a portfolio of commitments—studying was one activity out of a

busy life; (3) Part of an organised leisure lifestyle such as painting; (4) A way of life—for these people studying was their main activity in retirement and provided a source not only of knowledge but also of friendships. The first type, (1) education as part of a search for meaning and self-development is relevant to analyse the illustrated example, which will be discussed later in the paper.

## **2 Sociocultural Theory Perspective on Learning to Build Resilience and Relational Agency**

Advocates of successful ageing (e.g., Baltes & Lang, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1990) underline that continuity in life roles and life goals is not easily sustainable across time and cultures. Change is to be expected, and adjustment and adaptation to changing roles and cultural environments are fundamental to resilient functioning (Fry & Keyes, 2010). This accords with the sociocultural view of human development (Valsiner, 2000). Valsiner's three key assumptions of human development are useful in developing a view of learning in later life: (1) development in the irreversible time process; (2) dynamic stability; (3) semiotic activity of people—in this paper, in later life. In the irreversible time process of the life course, people in later life trace critical incidents, key moments and major achievements, and construct the meaning of their life through the use of signs. These assumptions on development underlie sociocultural theory's view of learning of people in later life as a dynamic, semiotic activity in the irreversible time. In this view, it is important to examine how people in later life make sense of their retirement, a major change in life, *not* treating retirement (or any rupture in life) as an independent variable causing the person to learn to build resilience. Some people who face retirement make efforts to achieve stability of life, continuity over unpredictability. Achieving stability can be conceptualised as what Valsiner calls “dynamic stability”, i.e., the “result of constant dynamic process that maintain that stability” (p. 8). I examine the participant conferring meanings to her retirement experience



and articulate what it means for her to learn in later life and to be resilient. Likewise, the approach reveals the ways in which the person turns life's adversities and challenges into positively formulated goals and identifies possibilities for future action.

To extend the above discussion of how a person in later life mobilises sources of human-strength and builds resilience against adversity and life challenges, building resilience can be examined from a sociocultural theory perspective as a learning process. People in later life use symbolic resource to overcome adversities and life challenges. Sociocultural theory, along with its strand, Cultural-historical activity theory (hereafter CHAT), is a relevant approach to the analysis of learning and the context in which it occurs. Sociocultural theory and CHAT enable me to consider the intertwining of human thought and action with practices and institutional affordances for action (Edwards, 2001). Thus, resilience can be examined in the context of the culture and society in which a person participates, not inside the mind of the person. I will, therefore, analyse the life stories that account for various ways in which people in later life experience their life transitions, showing how creatively they handle life changes. Oftentimes, changes such as illness and deaths in the family are unpredictable and can lead to further hardships and challenges. In such cases, we can enquire about how people in later life build resilience and learn new skills, solves problems and act towards creating a positive outlook.

The notion of relational agency is highly relevant to furthering our understanding of people in later life learning to build resilience and become a resourceful practitioner of life and to analysing the very processes. Relational agency involves "a capacity to offer support and to ask for support from others... one's ability to engage with the world is enhanced by doing so alongside with others" (Edwards, 2005, p. 168) and "a capacity to both seek and give help when engaging with the world" (p. 168). Edwards' relational agency comes with a relational inflection to Taylor's concept of agency (Taylor, 1977). She sees relational agency

as a capacity with *a shift to the relational*, or drawing on Goodwin's notion of "relationship as important 'social glue', helping people deal with the uncertainties of their changing world" (2005, p. 615). The concept of relational agency has been widely potent in promoting interagency work involving multiple institutions (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher, & Ludvigsen, 2013), teaching the art of learning to work together in professional settings (Ellis, Edwards, & Smagorinsky, 2010). Relational agency can arguably be applicable beyond professional interagency work and can account for the way in which people in later life learn to be resilient and become a resourceful practitioner of life in the face of adversities, difficulties and life challenges.

The study also examines the participant's use of symbolic resources, as she used and mediated her actions to choose among options, paths and solutions already available, as well as creating alternative, even imaginary detour paths when faced with enduring adversities in her life. "Symbolic resources are cultural elements<sup>2</sup> that persons use... and such uses mediate changes" (Zittoun, 2006, p. 104). Symbolic resources, termed as "intrapsychic uses...can be deliberately used to transform one's relationship to oneself" (p. 104) and some people use them to reflect on their own experiences (or rather use them to avoid thinking about their experience) (Zittoun, 2006). The ensuing analysis identifies symbolic resources and mediated action, that is, how people in later life use objects and tools, both physical and psychological, to structure their interactions, communicate with each other, and make sense of their experience. The analysis also highlights the idiographic nature of social and personal conditions of the person in later life and indicates the life course as a fundamentally open

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<sup>2</sup> According to Zittoun (2006), books, movies or paintings can be examples of cultural elements. Cultural elements enable the process of semiotic mediation. As they are subjected to certain rules, constraints or conventions of the practice, a person experiencing the book or music is exposed to a particular configuration of semiotic units, which mediate their experience at various levels. These configurations constitute and transform meaning-content (p. 43). Again, it is worth noting that use of symbolic resources points to possibilities, rather than a fixed state or outcome of the use.

system (Valsiner, 2017) and through the use of symbolic resources, learning in later life might be facilitated or hindered.

In examining learning in retirement as a transition process, it is deemed necessary to seek another theoretical input in order to underpin the person in developmental process, and learning in later life. I adopt a dialogical approach to learning (Ritella & Ligorio, 2019) as it shares the current study's agenda to examine learning as a concrete, dynamic form of social action. In particular, one central feature of dialogical approaches is their analytic focus on the social and relational aspects of learning (Ritella & Ligorio, 2019). This approach is rooted in the Dialogical Self Theory (DST hereafter, Hermans, 2001; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992; Hermans & Gieser, 2012). The dialogical self is described as "a dynamic multiplicity of the I positions in the mind, intertwined as this mind with the minds of other people" (Hermans, 2002, p. 147). The DST approach enables me to analyse the interview data by revealing the multiplicity and complexity of I positions at the same time, maintaining an interplay between opposite perspectives and points of view of the person in later life, whilst considering material and immaterial elements, such as symbolic resources and relational agency.

### **3 Method**

#### **3.1 Design**

The study reported here is a single case study carried out through face-to-face research interviews (Yin, 2009; Zittoun, 2017). The analysis resides in the approach to studying development as an open system through the study of transitions and the processes of exploration that follow ruptures in people's lives (Zittoun, 2006). Furthermore, being exploratory and seeking to generate preliminary findings of resilience in people's learning in later age, the study shares the assumptions of the idiographic scientific method (Salvatore &

Valsiner, 2010; Sato, Yasuda, Kido, Arakawa, Mizoguchi, & Valsiner, 2007). This method helps me to understand sociocultural experiences such as retirement as part of a life trajectory (Sato, Hidaka, & Fukuda, 2009). The sociocultural theoretical perspective informs the methodological approach in which the interviews, such as life story telling, is regarded as a semiotic activity, which enables the persons' past to connect their present and future. Although past events could be seen to be random occurrences, those occurrences can be reordered and constructed into a life story as they make sense of them (Bruner, 1991, 2004). Following transition as a process (Zittoun, 2006, 2008; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Iverson, & Psaltis, 2003; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2013), the study entails a processual account of the person's dynamic positioning in the life course and of the personal sense given to a rupture triggered by retirement and related events. The knowledge produced by this idiographic scientific approach is not aimed at achieving generalisability, but is deemed to eventually contribute to "arriving at a generalized model that fits the generic organisation of the selected aspect of the phenomena" (Sato, Yasuda, Kido, Arakawa, Mizoguchi & Valsiner, 2007, p 83). Thus, the interviews conducted generated qualitative data, that are rich in life stories with retirement as a bifurcation point. The interview questions were modelled after life review<sup>3</sup> related questions (Butler, 1981). A preliminary analysis of the interviews led me to theorise the participant learning to be resilient and becoming a resourceful practitioner of later life as a dynamic movement of dialogic positions, which harnesses the reflexivity to resolve tensions of selves in the process of learning. Dialogical tensions in positioning (Hermans, 2001) were ubiquitously observed in the participant's life stories, with the stories being especially enriched with nuanced accounts expressing the complexity of meanings and

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<sup>3</sup> According to Psychiatrist Robert Butler, who coined the term life review, '[b]y reviewing the past events of their lives, old people put their lives in perspective, prove to themselves that their lives have been worthwhile and prepare themselves for death with a minimum of fear or anxiety (Butler, n.d., p. 1). Life review reveals the tendency of older people towards self-reflection. Butler used the concept of life review and developed life review therapy for achieving successful ageing. Life review therapy has adults refer to the past to achieve a sense of peace or empowerment about their lives.

unsettled emotions when accounting for the participant being faced with difficulties, adversities, challenges or failure at her workplace and in various settings in which she learned to be resilient and became resourceful.

### 3.2 Participant

I chose to interview Midori (pseudonym), a 68 year-old Japanese woman, living in Copenhagen for over 40 years. I have known Midori since November 2014 through an introduction by a common acquaintance. There were a number of informal occasions for us to chat about her life adventure and the ups and downs of life in Denmark, as well as her views on life after retirement, especially when she expressed age related concerns—being frail and experiencing physical issues of mobility, memory loss and losing stamina. She has been working on re-establishing her life in retirement, pondering on what it means to have a life without a purpose and daily routine. Therefore, I felt she was a suitable person to interview and explore issues related to ageing and learning. I obtained and recorded the informed consent from her orally prior to the interviews.

Midori's adult life, as she described, is far from ordinary. She left Japan after graduating from university and went to Denmark to study at *folkehøjskole* (tr: folk high school) in 1972 for a semester and then worked as an *au pair* for two years. In 1974 she married a Japanese artist working in Denmark. Their first three and half-month year-old son died in 1977 due to a traffic accident, and she then subsequently had two other sons. Her husband died in 1993. Midori was widowed<sup>4</sup> at 43 and raised her two sons as a single working mother, continuing to live in Denmark, instead of returning to Japan. She keeps in close contact with her sons (one now aged late 20s, the other aged 30s, both married) and grandchildren. She worked as a customer service agent for internationally operated airline

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<sup>4</sup> Midori, the participant never used the term 'widow' when referring to herself.

companies in Copenhagen for nearly 40 years until her retirement at the age of 65. She said she had no regrets in retiring from her work and felt fulfilled by leaving her work life behind.

### 3.3 Method of Data Collection

Two unstructured face-to-face interviews were conducted. For the first interview, I visited Midori at her home in a town near Copenhagen on 29th September 2017. Her retirement seemed to be a natural entry point to start the interview and as a time marker for her to segment her life into life stages. The interview schedule was prepared in advance according to Butler's life review manual (n.d.) and in line with the overall project of learning in later life. Following the life review interview, I first asked Midori to trace her chronological life details. I then asked how her life has changed, focusing on the topic of her retirement and life upon it. Further questions based on her response were made to elicit extended responses, in which she spoke of how she dealt with life changes, namely adversity and challenges, and her use of symbolic resources and social support to manage changes in her life.

The first interview was held after a quick supper together. In that relaxed atmosphere over after-dinner tea, the interview lasted 1 hour and 33 minutes. The interview was conducted entirely in Japanese, the native language of both speakers. The interview was audio recorded and I took a few snap photos of Midori as she was being interviewed. Except for a few prepared questions, I asked questions elicited by issues raised by Midori to delve deeper into those areas. I contacted her again in June 2018 for a follow-up interview in order to clarify a few points that arose from an initial analysis of the first interview. The second interview took place at Midori's house and lasted 50 minutes.

The interviews provided me an opportunity to observe what is called affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Linell, 2009) in the interview practice. This concept enabled me to gauge the on-going, unfolding interaction at the level of nuances as well as something between the lines. The atmosphere of the interview was informal, convivial and friendly. The

ubiquity of para-verbal modalities such as gestures, facial expressions and prosodic features (giggling and bursting into laughter, gasping of breath or inhaling over laughter) evidence these features are not secondary, as Silverman (1998) noted, that they are “a way of attuning someone to know how to hear someone’s story” (p. 117). Likewise, Haight (2001) discussed that sharing life stories with older adults in the form of life review has been overwhelmingly positive. It is considered as “acts of intimacy” (p. 90). It involves personal disclosure; therefore, the researcher should ensure mutual caring and trust in conducting the interviews.

More importantly, the very practice of this kind of interview would qualify the concept of the active interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; 1997), highlighting a participant and interviewer’s active construction of meaning of the events and people discussed. In the active interview, “skills involved in bringing off a successful interview are shared by both interviewer *and* interviewee” (Silverman, 2001, p. 95). Furthermore, “active listening is important as the specific mastery of questioning techniques” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 138). The interviewer needs to be an active listener. For example, the art of the second question is crucial to the success of the active interview. Following the research ethics guidelines, informed consent was sought to ensure anonymity of the participant and to protect confidentiality (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

### 3.4 Method of Analysis

The first audio-recorded interview was transcribed by a Japanese research assistant. I transcribed the follow up (second) interview using the same protocol. As the interviews were conducted in Japanese, the native language of both the interview participant and the interviewer, transcriptions were initially in Japanese orthography in accordance with the transcription convention (see Appendix). For the preliminary stage of analysis<sup>5</sup>, topical

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<sup>5</sup> In the writing up stage, I translated the chosen extracts into English.

prevalence (Murakami & Jacobs, 2017) was considered first in order to have an overview of the issues raised by the participant in the interviews. After identifying the prevalent topics, I conducted a thematic analysis, ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between two levels of themes: semantic and latent. In this study, I follow what they call themes at semantic level. Semantic themes “within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written” (p.84). The semantic themes identified include 1) life writing as lifework, 2) learning in later life and 3) the power of faith amongst others. The three themes are relevant to the overall research agenda of learning in later life and the concepts of resilience, with the use of symbolic resources and social support and the concept of relational agency for becoming a resourceful practitioner of life. I analysed the extracts by focusing on the way in which the participant mobilised symbolic resources and social support and used them in the face of adversity and new challenges. In particular, I looked for rhetorical contrasts and dilemmas of I-positions, or for contrasting or multiple interpretations of key events or people that mattered to the retirement and her transition process. Midori described pensively the times when she faced unexpected adversities (e.g., loss of her first son, loss of her husband, the long period of bereavement, having to make a living as a single working mother with two children as an expatriate) and told how she was emotionally challenged, with her social, cultural and linguistic competences stretched to her limit (e.g., she struggled to learn Danish, felt difficulty with cultural integration to Danish society and was subjected to workplace bullying).



## 4 Findings

One of the themes identified in the thematic analysis was what retirement meant to her. This was clustered around the semantic theme of lifework, including the topics of life-writing and the changing relationship with her sons and grandchildren. She shared other episodes of being interviewed for the first time, recurring memories of her deceased husband, integrating into Danish society, workplace bullying, the struggle to learn how to use computers and IT, learning to be a qualified Japanese language teacher and the role of faith in her life. In the following, I present three major semantic themes: life-writing as lifework, learning to be a qualified teacher of Japanese language and the power of faith. These themes are elaborated in terms of how Midori learned to build resilience and became a resourceful practitioner of life in the face of adversities and challenges that she met during five decades.

### 4.1 Life-Writing as Lifework

Like many people in later life, Midori reported that her retirement at the age of 65, three years ago, presented a rupture in the transition from employment to a life without responsibility and freedom. She framed this rupture as an opportunity to break away from her life so far, which had been dedicated to work and family. The retirement-related rupture prompted an urgent need to “reset” and find a “lifework” for her new life goal. Several minutes after the beginning of the interview, I asked her about the major changes occurring upon her retirement. Extract 1 shows Midori’s response to my question of how her life has changed in facing the retirement and in retirement.

#### *Extract 1*

- |   |    |  |
|---|----|--|
| 1 | M: | Well, speaking of changes, in my case, I wanted to continue working up to the age of 65, that was my goal. But I could not, never thought of my work as my |
| → |    | <u>last</u> work. So, I have wanted to find something that qualifies <u>lifework</u> , after 65 years old.   |
| 2 | I: | Lifework humm  |
| 3 | M: | Lifework, I <u>love</u> this word <u>lifework</u> ((laughter)), if I may say.  |

When asked to elaborate on what lifework means and what it entails, Midori further explained:

*Extract 2*

- 4 → M: Lifework means to me that it is something I would like to do, firstly I have a desire to do something, then to continue. And there is some conviction about it, well, there is the feeling of excitement about me going into that world [of lifework], you know, up until now, I work as a salaried employee, imparting or sharing my skills [to work], it seems. When I think about lifework, it is I, I get into doing something, right? Into that world and live in it. It is something very attractive, so to speak
- 5 I: I see. So, three years ago, what did you think your lifework might be in a concrete sense?
- 6 M: Not really
- 7 I: But you did think you wanted to lifework, right?
- 8 M: Certainly, my own, after I retired from my work ((skip a few lines))
- 9 M: ...Upon my retirement, I wanted to live the rest of my life like, my later life in that way
- 10 I: So, are you presently doing something, like the lifework? ((skip a line)) I mean, have you found one?
- 11 → M: Oh, well, [since that time, three years ago] I am not sure now if I have the lifework, but, you know, well, I have no particular talent, right(?), but when I am writing something, or when I am about to write something, or when something pops up in my head as a topic, or many thoughts creep up in my head and I wondered how I can write up those ideas and topics, in which order I should present them, for instance. I enjoy the time to think about those things.

Following a serendipitous opportunity to be interviewed by a journalist in Japan as the mother of two successful international business enterprise sons, Midori decided to take up autobiographical life writing as a retirement project, which she calls ‘lifework’, with a newfound passion. She herself was unsure of what she meant by ‘lifework’, but she spoke of it with great enthusiasm (turns 4, 11). At times, she appeared somewhat hesitant to reveal what lifework was as it sounded too dramatic for an ordinary person to speak of. Lifework for her was presented, as it were, incipient, not really ready to be spelt out; it was the anticipation, something that is yet to be, rather than a definable new life goal. Following DST (Hermans, 2001), two I-positions in time are identified, being the contrasting positions in time between what she was, based on her life led by salaried employment and what she wants to be, based on lifework, which is yet to be.

Life-writing for her is not merely a self-indulgent hobby. This is a way for her to develop a different relationship with her two adult sons. She explained, halfway through the interview, whilst talking about how differently she started to think about her relationship with her sons: “I would like to write in order to leave my children the parts of my life that have not been told.” and “What shall I leave behind?” Life-writing pertains to the question of legacy, or the meaning or purpose of life (Frankl, 1963). She started writing her life story after being interviewed by the journalist a few years ago: “I wrote about 40 essays in the duration of two months; I’ve never been a writer” (Interview 1). The writer’s identity she found is embedded in the threads that run through many of the stories she told. She repeatedly refers to herself as: “An ordinary, naive girl from Japan coming to Denmark, having been posed various challenges”, “overcoming adversities” (Interview 1).

For Midori, diary keeping is a precursor to her newly-found lifework of life writing:

*Extract 3*

- 12        M: I have been keeping diary. Diary keeping is the only way for me to bust my stress. In early days ((in Denmark)) I had a number of hardships and difficulties. Writing hardships and difficulties calms me down, so I wrote one by one what I wanted to say. For example ((laughing)), I had someone I did not like, then I wrote about her, like this  
              → [showing the diary page], and I digest those within myself. That way, I could keep peace with that person; I did not have to have a quarrel with her. My life was full of those moments of having to repress my own feelings, so I wrote them in my diary.

Diary keeping for her is more than just writing down daily occurrences. From turn 12 (“writing hardships and difficulties calm me down”, “I digest those within myself”, “I could keep peace with that person”), it qualifies a notion of self-writing (Zittoun, 2006); it is to keep being afloat and resilient in her early days of living and working in Denmark. Again, dialogic tensions between I-positions (Hermans, 2001) are visible here in the way she talked about writing her life events in a diary: Midori being in control in order to be resilient to difficulties and hardships in contrast to a counter-position, another Midori, who wanted to burst into those social others with her raw feelings.

## 4.2 Learning in Later Life

Midori's quest for lifework as life writing was expressed consistently across the two interviews. However, apart from diary keeping, she said she had never written to any audience. Learning in later life comes with a huge mental burden, as she felt it difficult to remember new ideas and concepts at work, especially handling tasks using computers. She also struggled to use computers to write reports and essays when she signed up for a Japanese language teacher-training course. In the first interview, she speaks at length of the hardships and difficulties in her latest learning experience, with a teacher training course for a Japanese as foreign language teaching certificate:

### *Extract 4 (12:0:53)*

- 13 I: You never succumbed to adversities
- 14 → M: I thought that my own life began then upon my retirement. Yes, I was worried about my memory and other mental functions.
- 15 I: You did not have any memory problem, did you?
- 16 → M: Not really, but I knew that I would be slow memorising things, so I thought I must go now to study to be a qualified Japanese teacher. So I went on immediately to the language teacher-training course in London.
- 17 I: Before your memory function deteriorated
- 18 → M: If I had waited for one year or so and taken a break after the retirement, I knew that I would never act on it, so I went to London to take an entrance exam and interview before my retirement. Otherwise, I would end up thinking I do not have to get up early in the morning when being retired.

Learning is taken as a here-and-now action despite uncertainties and fears of the unknown.

According to Jamieson (2016), the older learners' educational decision-making processes were more consistently guided by strong motives and clear goals. Reporting her studies, Jamieson commented (2016):

For many women, study was a chance to make up for lost opportunities in their earlier lives. Most of the older learners seemed aware of their future selves and were motivated by a desire to maximise their intellectual capacity in the face of real or imagined threats to that capacity. The awareness of time, of the future becoming the here and now, was heightened. (p. 482)

Returning to formal education for a teaching certificate is clearly a big challenge and Midori reported it as a dilemma. In that dialogic tension, she again maintained her positivity. She further explained what it was like to be back on an intensive training course, positively framing her learning experience:

*Extract 5*

- 19 M: What was great was that it felt like going back to the university and study. It was a lot of fun because the subject is something I like and enjoy studying.

Her joy of learning in the intensive course is anxiety-free. She explained her environment as follows:

*Extract 6*

- 20 M: There were a lot of young people around me. When studying with them, I felt that I was from a different generation. The study involves the use of computer, so I was not at all embarrassed to ask for help when it comes to studying with computers. It is true that I struggled studying and needed help from others ((laughter)), but when it comes to life experiences, they always appreciated my stories. That gave me a lot of confidence.

This extract shows that Midori is a resourceful learner (Edwards, 2005), using her relational agency to seek support from classmates who are much younger than her and managing to be resilient to a potentially negative situation. Reflecting on her learning to be certified to teach Japanese, she identified the problem of learning to use computers. IT learning did not exist in her university days. Instead of hiding herself from the problem, she turned the difficult situation around and put the classmates (i.e., younger classmates) on her side as a source for support, a way of evaluating the situation and moving forward by seeking support from others. Her newly found confidence in this learning episode is identified as learning in collaboration with others in the social network she built (Mercer, 2000).

#### **4.3 Faith as a Symbolic Resource**

So far, I have analysed how Midori, upon retirement, took up a new subject to learn for a teaching qualification, and built up her resilience to the difficult situations. She is a

resourceful practitioner of life's adversities and challenges, learning to be creative in solving problems as well as keeping a positive attitude. This overall disposition of hers became very clear during the first interview. In the preliminary analysis of this interview, I wondered whether she could further explain how she manages to maintain this consistent approach to her life, so I set up another interview with her. In the follow-up interview, she unequivocally answered my question on the source of her resilience and positivity, in her practice of faith (Buddhism, in this case).

*Extract 7 (12:40:40)*

- 21 I: I think you embody what is called resilience in English.
- 22 M: Goodness me!
- 23 I: I am amazed at the way you embrace support and convert criticism from others.
- 24 → M: That's because I have strong faith (in Buddhism). That's the bottom line.
- 25 M: It is not just that I have had faith since my youth. What is amazing with the teachings of Buddha is that it is always myself and others around you, or in a grand sense, self and the universe, so how one can be united with the teacher is the question. After all, the wisdom of Buddha is within myself. Despite coming across something I never experienced, you come to find an answer, or see the Buddha's wisdom if you think hard about it. And what's more, when I think that's it, I have to act on it. Another principle of the teachings of Buddha is that the teacher and the student are inseparable. If you are a Buddhist, you should understand this principle.

Furthermore, Midori explained her faith practice in terms of faith dialogue in everyday life:

*Extract 8 (12:43:54)*

- 26 M: There is always someone who guides and teaches me. And that person is with me always; it is not that the person stays over/above you, but is more like the person walks with me. When I am not sure, I can turn to the person and he/she gives me suggestions, leads me to it. In tough times, I can persevere more, thinking that I should not waste the suggestion or encouragement. The teacher is always with me. That's the amazing thing about the teachings of Buddha. ((I nods))
- 27 M: For instance, when a book you read impresses you deeply, it stays in you. It is there all the time and supports you. Likewise, the teachings of Buddha stay in you when you chant mantra aloud, it moves with you all the way and your life stays in that movement, therefore, my life cannot be thought of without that very movement.
- 28 I: I have been wondering what are the roots of your resilience for a long time
- 29 → M: As for me, it is nothing but the faith.

30 → M: But it depends on the person. In my case, I am always on the edge of the cliff and (thanks to the teachings of Buddha) I have been guided not to fall off the cliff. That must be the element of my happiness because I did not fall off the cliff. ((Laughter)). It is the only thing; the teachings of Buddha are.

She explained her unique relationship to Buddhism. The relationship exemplifies Buber's notion of dialogue (Buber, 1947, 1970). She herself is never alone, as she is always guided by an imaginary other, the Buddhist teacher. Her faith scaffolds her life choices whenever she comes to turning points, bifurcation points in Trajectory Equifinality Model's term (Sato, Hidaka, Fukuda, 2009; Sato et al, 2007). On the occasions in which she had to deal with adversities, as well as having to make difficult choices, she identifies a number of symbolic resources to learn and act upon according to the teachings of Buddha: chanting Buddhist mantra and inspirational messages from books she read. For her, faith is vital for maintaining resilience and gives her life a sense of clear purpose. From the sociocultural theory perspective, one comes to see how Midori develops and configures her own environment in a constantly changing world, using symbolic resources to build and maintain resilience, that is to "orchestrate own competences, or reorient their lives, or imagines alternatives. The emphasis is on processes and dynamics, not on outcomes or stable entities" (Baucal & Zittoun, 2013, p. 210).

## **5 Discussion**

The interviews conducted entail more than a person in later life reminiscing on her past life. They are a purposeful exploration of her meaning of lived life, not just simply discussing past events, people and objects, beyond the person's life events in sequence (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Through reminiscence and life review we tell stories about events to make 'human sense' (Fivush, 2008, p. 240). In the telling of life stories people place themselves in the event, recalling not only the details, but the desires, thoughts and experiences, adding an emotional dimension to the talk.

The analysis of the single-case study enabled me to see the participant's consistent resilient approach to life against adversity and her resourcefulness being applied in changing a difficult situation into one that she can manage and act on. Talking, in the form of an interview, implicitly asked Midori to be reflective, exploratory, imaginary, finding new voices, new beings, inventing self and plotting a life that is yet to be through her lifework, as a means of innovation (Zittoun, 2013). This lifework is guided by her Buddhist faith and grounded in everyday practice.

With the analysis of the interviews I have also shown that Midori is a resourceful practitioner of life. She could turn adversities into positivity and difficulties into things that can be overcome with relational agency to seek social support and collaborate with others. She came across ruptures, where she was demanded upon to act towards a set goal and to mobilise a diverse array of symbolic resources. Midori works with what life brings, living in it and moving with it. The life she has lived is an example of the dynamic movement of life as an open system.

## **6 Concluding Remarks**

Drawing on the sociocultural theory framework including CHAT and DST perspectives, I explored how a person in later life learns to build resilience and become a resourceful practitioner of life with use of symbolic resources. Through active interviewing, the case study participant was asked to reflect and review key life events and persons that crossed her life. The work presented here, albeit exploratory, contributes to an understanding of a social, dynamic, semiotic nature of learning in later life. The sociocultural theory perspective enables a notion of resilience as a social, relational concept. Unlike a popular association of ageing with vulnerability, physical frailty, cognitive impairment and incapacity, the resilient functioning of people in later life implies each individual's agency taking charge, to strive, to thrive, and to live a fulfilling life by invoking whatever symbolic resources they use and act



upon in the face of adversities and difficulties. The case study reveals various uses of symbolic resources, for example, diary keeping as self-writing, seeking family and other social support, chanting mantra and faith dialogue of seeking guidance from Buddhist teachings. As a resourceful practitioner of life (Edwards, 2005), she uses symbolic resources effectively to meet her current needs and to achieve new-found passions and life goals (life-writing as lifework). This finding confirms that a personal change is initiated and mediated by the symbolic resources with a relational agency. This is in line with the view that individuals are not only inherently resilient, but also will use whatever management or adaptive resources they have, whether these are derived from a sense of personal control, efficacy and mastery, or from personal or religious faith, or faith in the goodness of humanity or Providence, to overcome life's problems, and to seek solutions to the dilemmas that face them (Bonanno, 2004, 2005).

Lastly, learning to be resilient in the ageing process involves a continual development of restructuring, through which people in later life select their highest priority meanings for life. In the case of the example above (e.g., pursuing passion for life-writing as her lifework), the case study participant strives to achieve 'highest goals and activities, and implement their most highly valued abilities and competencies to attain desired goals, and also to compensate for lost or diminished capacities' (Frey et al, 2010, p. 48). Furthermore, faith has a vital role in the innovation of the participant's life, that is, her personal transformation is made possible by her resilience and adaptive capabilities, which are equally geared toward her future potentials (Frankl, 1963). This shows an immense openness and active positioning of the self, amenable to the unknown as a resource for the active making of her future.

## Appendix: Transcription notations used in the study<sup>6</sup>

house

accentual emphasis

[...]

omitted speech

(there)

doubtful transcription

((*coughs*))

description of action

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<sup>6</sup> These notations are taken from Jefferson system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

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